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Making great communities happen

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The Heart of the Matter

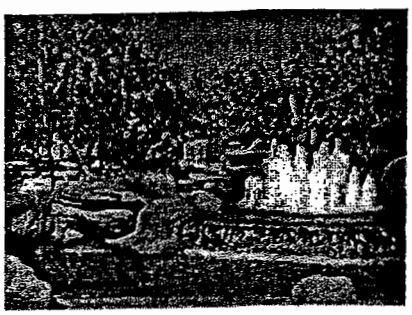
In the fight against sprawl, it's mixed-use cores to the rescue.

By Rodney E. Engelen, AICP

Planners work hard to make great communities happen. But would great communities:

- Relentlessly destroy farms, wetlands, and natural resources?
- Wantonly waste energy and water?
- Stick with expensive and inadequate transportation systems?
- Make second-class citizens of the poor, elderly, and disadvantaged?
- Do little to elevate the human spirit through beauty, amenity, culture, and history?

Many of us are trying to re-energize planning at the project scale. Consider the many recent initiatives to deal with sprawl, manage growth, and market "new urbanism" principles. But we must do much more, more boldly, on a larger scale, and do it better.



To start, we must define what we mean by "greatness." Here are four possible elements of such a definition: Allow everyone to live in well-planned communities and neighborhoods. Save natural areas and open space and protect cultural and historic features. Provide adequate infrastructure. Locate all intense, "attraction" activities in well-planned, mixed-use areas — downtowns and cores.

While we need more success in all of these areas, the most important would be building good downtowns and cores. Intense commercial, governmental, institutional, and cultural functions are the key generators of employment, focal points of society, and basic shapers of our cities. We should require them to be part of healthy, mixed-use cores.

A familiar tune

It is discouraging to realize that this conclusion was reached more than 40 years ago in dozens of research projects, books, and regional plans. Some of the early work in this area was undertaken in cities seeking to overcome years of neglect during the Depression and World War II — and to cope with competition from newly energized suburbs.

The Chicago Central Area Committee did excellent work in the 1950s, when Ted Aschman, the city's former planning director, served as the committee's consultant. He drew on experiences in Cincinnati and Seattle as well as Chicago. Aschman assembled a set of development principles and convinced a receptive business community and the first Mayor Daley of their value. They guide development in downtown Chicago to this day. In 1958, Minneapolis became the first city to adopt these principles for its downtown. Others followed suit.

Briefly stated, the principles say that to be successful a downtown or core must have the following: good access, mixed uses, compactness, ease of internal movement, amenities and images, strong environmental support and good management. These principles provide the basic guidance needed to produce a plan for good downtowns, cores, or centers.

Many people assumed that the suburban shopping centers being built during the 1960s would provide

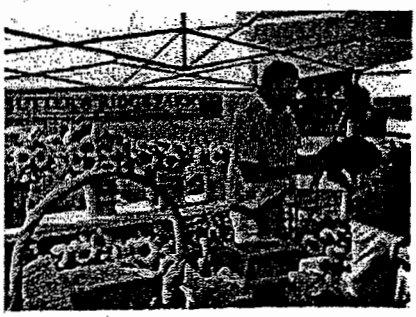
these qualities. But often they did not. Victor Gruen saw this as early as 1973 and said so in his book, Centers for the Urban Environment. He gave a scathing critique of how shopping centers were being built (he called them uni-functional centers), urged that regions be organized around a system of multi - functional centers, and said that these centers should be anchored by a wide range of functions (not just shopping).

Several research studies came to the same conclusion. The first, compiled in 1968 for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development by Barton-Aschman Associates of Evanston, Illinois, recommended that land uses be organized into mixed-use clusters designed to meet the needs of neighborhoods, communities, and regions (even super regions). The second, done in 1981 for the U.S. Department of Transportation, recommended that metropolitan regions be developed into a series of centers (at the subregional level) to provide focal points for regional and subregional transit service. Jerry Schneider, the author of the second report, called this concept "polycentric."

About a dozen metro areas prepared plans following the polycentric concept. They included Minneapolis, Toronto, Vancouver, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Baltimore. Several of these areas developed principles and programs for their development, and a few conducted major studies to measure benefits and establish implementing policies. Locations were proposed, and a few pro-core policies and plans were adopted.

However, no one recognized just how strong such policies and programs would have to be to produce the desired results. And almost no one applied the principles emerging from downtown planning to the design of suburban cores. Very little was done to put new commercial, institutional, or public functions into these centers to make them truly *mixed-use*. Even fewer were compact. And far more development was located outside of centers than within.

Some hope



The result is the condition we have today: the widespread, single-use, unplanned, wasteful, vulnerable-to-obsolescence, and often conflicting development that we call sprawl — with all its attendant problems.

According to the Urban Land Institute, one in five of the country's major suburban shopping centers is obsolete or in danger of becoming so. Five of the first six such centers in Phoenix have had to be totally rebuilt. The International Downtown Executives Association recognizes 47,000 shopping centers in the U. S. Most of these could be targeted for improvement, as could tens of thousands of individual office and institutional complexes. The deficiencies of such areas are a major source of blight, congestion, traffic, environmental degradation, and neighborhood abandonment.

A few organizations — including the American Planning Association, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the Regional Plan Association in New York City — have suggested ways to deal with these problems. But these programs reach only a tiny fraction of existing cores, and very few, if any, aim to get development in — or become the centers of — new mixed-use centers.

Public and corporate support?

The potential value of mixed-use centers suggests that we should give them wide national, regional, and state support in the same way that we support our goals in education, health, housing, security, transportation, and the environment. We should recognize that such centers may be one of the best tools we have to achieve planning goals.

One who makes this point strongly is Donovan Rypkema, an economic development consultant and principal of the firm Place Economics. Writing in the Winter 2003 issue of the Journal of the American Planning Association, he noted that downtowns are important for effective environmental, transportation, preservation, and smart growth policies. He also noted that downtowns are essential for community economic health, diversity, and public expression.

The same points apply if you substitute the word "cores" for the word "downtowns."

Other arguments for cores

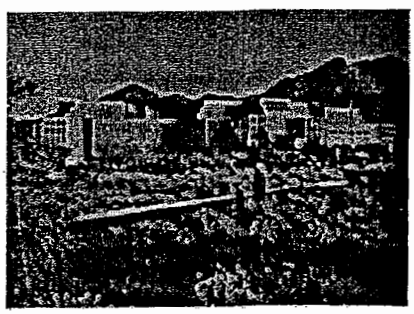
Victor Gruen suggested that mixed-use centers have the following traits:

- *Consistency with market trends*. Cities have always grown around markets. But in the 20th century, extensive automobile use created more potential sites than markets can support, making it hard to focus demand in good cores and encouraging sprawl. In this century, however, continued population growth, combined with increased congestion, will make cores more attractive as the way to handle growth.

- *Reduced travel*. A major argument for establishing strong cores is that they will reduce travel requirements and thus also reduce consumption of space, time, and energy. By putting more people within a relatively short distance of work, school, and shopping, cores will increase the feasibility of transit and encourage walking and bicycling. They will also be a focus for transit, taxis, and car pooling.

- *Housing opportunity, urbanity, and self-sufficiency*. In Schneider's study, the arguments for the polycentric urban form fall into three categories: providing places other than the central city for low-income people to live, making the suburbs more urbane, and making the outlying parts of the city more self-sufficient. These three objectives appear in nearly all regional development plans.

How can we get better mixed-use centers?



Considering our obvious need for mixed-use centers, there are not nearly as many of them as one would expect. What makes us think we will be more successful in creating them today?

For starters, the failure and obsolescence of so many shopping centers has increased our awareness of the shortcomings of single-use centers. Further, many experienced consultants and organizations are now available to assist in project planning and management.

Second, true mixed-use developments require public (including transportation) and institutional involvement. In the past, however, there were numerous legal and financial barriers to cooperation between government and private entities. Recent changes in local and state laws now make it more feasible to accommodate multiple and mixed uses.

Public acceptance is also higher. Enough good projects have been built in recent years to make it easier to gain acceptance and support for mixed-use developments and the higher densities they typically imply.

Finally, there has been pressure on land costs. In the past, with abundant land and low land costs, communities and developers faced little pressure to cooperate. This is no longer the case, which means that developers are looking for partners to help save money or share costs.

What to do now?

Today, there are many more relatively small, self-contained, mixed-use projects, usually with a single developer. And many existing cores are benefitting from efforts to nourish the depth and variety of their activity.

Meriter Hospital in Madison, Wisconsin, has added a retirement center to its downtown location, enriching the city's center.

In Glendale, Arizona, the new Cardinals Stadium and the adjacent, 223-acre master planned development have the potential of becoming a whole new downtown competitive with Phoenix and Scottsdale.

Further, old military bases are being converted to urban villages. (See "Extreme Makeovers," April 2005.) However, their rebuilding needs to follow sound core principles more closely.

In all these cases, there has been a deliberate attempt to make the cores more mixed-use — and to include housing. This is an important first step.

Who's improving centers and cores

Dozens of older centers in Chicago and its suburbs are adding hundreds of housing units along with theaters, restaurants, health clubs, book stores, and coffee shops to create a much stronger draw for shopping and work. In Chicago, anchors such as the University of Illinois and the West Side Medical Center have joined developers to create neighborhoods with a healthy mix of activities and cores.

Arlington Heights is a commuter rail suburb northwest of Chicago whose dominant feature is a race track located about a mile from its downtown. In 1987, the community began a systematic retrofit of its 16-block, 46-acre downtown. Since then, the number of downtown housing units has grown from 150 to 1,230 and the downtown population from 350 to 2,200. By 2001, downtown's assessed value had jumped from $10.7 million to $43.7 million.

Downtown Arlington Heights now includes a new performing arts center, offices, retail, and a commuter station. Dedicated leadership, clear goals, and an experienced and dedicated staff — plus a building boom — have combined to make the project a success.

Mayo Clinic Hospital in Phoenix takes up a 210-acre site — an area larger than the hearts of downtown Minneapolis or Denver. On the campus are new clinics, a hospital and research center, education and administrative functions, housing for medical staff and students, and a hotel. Development of the Phoenix campus is just beginning. This could be a major center with much of the convenience, urbanity, and amenity of a downtown.

With such strong demand, the Mayo Clinic is obviously in a position to lead — and the local market is able to support — almost any plan that can be imagined. The degree to which this can be a true mixed-use project is limited only by the clinic's understanding of what is possible and of how its needs can be best met in the context of a mixed-use core.

Next steps

Douglas Porter has identified two types of mixed-use areas and some new centers that match them. (See "Business-Oriented Neighborhoods: Their Time Has Come," January 2004). He sees these as evolving from office parks and similar clusters of non-residential use to mixed-use with both civic and residential components. He identifies emerging centers near Dallas, Charlotte, West Palm Beach, and Washington, D. C. Once this trend takes hold, he says, it opens the way to creating thousands of mixed-cores through retrofitting of existing office and industrial parks, and medical, university, corporate, recreational, and other campuses.

What must we do to make successful mixed-use development the norm?

First, we should give formal endorsement, perhaps in the policy structure of our professional groups,to the concept of mixed-use cores.

Second, we should also provide guidelines and principles for development. Hundreds of mixed-use developments fall far short of their potential because they fail to follow one or more of the seven basic elements explained above. Understanding and commitment are needed.

Third, major educational and research centers should be established around the U.S. to assess the value and potential of mixed-use cores. These could be connected with appropriate planning, professional, or university organizations, such as the Regional Plan Association and APA.

Finally, states should become much more involved in promoting mixed-use core development. Such involvement and cooperation is needed to mediate, support, and span the interests of individual communities and to provide an umbrella of policies, programs, and laws to encourage and support core

development. A few states are involved in small but useful ways in Main Street programs sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. This approach should be broadened and expanded.

The problems limiting mixed-use areas are fewer and easier to overcome than they have been in past decades. However, these places are not going to happen without the support and work of the planning community. Much needs to be done.

Rodney Engelen, now retired, was a cofounder and senior partner of Barton-Aschman Associates in Evanston, Illinois, where he assisted 50 communities in planning their downtowns. He later was assistant to the mayor of Phoenix and an adjunct professor in planning at Arizona State University.

Images: Top — Tempe's downtown fountain is an example of a community that elevates the human spirit through beauty, amenity, culture, and history. Photo by Rod Engelen. Middle — An attractive flower stand in Madison, Wisconsin. Photo by Rod Engelen. Bottom — The Mayo Clinic has a facility in Scottsdale, Arizona. Photo courtesy Mayo Clinic Scottsdale.

What the Expert Said

Victor Gruen, once a successful shopping center designer, later became a severe critic. In his 1973 book, *Centers for the Urban Environment*, he wrote that shopping centers had become a bad model for almost every kind of development. What he especially disliked was its "uni-functional" composition.

Below are four examples of uni-functional centers that Gruen said would operate better as mixed-use centers. Others might include medical, sports, research, and back office functions.

- *Civic centers*. "These are huge conglomerations of governmental office structures in which bureaucrats meet only bureaucrats and are estranged from those whom they are supposed to serve. Like all uni-functional centers, they create traffic peaks. . . . They become deserted and sometimes unsafe in the evening and during holidays."

- *Centers for the performing arts*. "They represent the ingenious idea of concentrating a number of theaters, an opera house, and concert halls on one isolated land area . . . The only effects are that they flatter the ego of their sponsors and create chaotic traffic congestion during the short time spans when all the show places begin or end their performances."

- *Educational centers*. "Whether high school or university campuses, these constitute ghettos for the young."

- *Office centers*: "Here offices of private corporations are concentrated in heaps of skyscrapers, traffic-logged at office opening and closing times and deserted" at other times.

Gruen pointed to particular problems of uni-functional developments: needlessly costly and complicated travel patterns, sterile environments with limited services, and unnecessary public and private financial burdens.

As a footnote, it should be said that Vienna, Austria, Gruen's hometown, offers an example of how not to build a core. The United Nations has developed a complex of offices there that employ more than 4,000 people. The area has good access to highways and transit, and it attracts thousands of visitors each year for meetings and conferences.

But in almost every other regard it fails to conform to sound principles for core development. It is almost completely uni-functional and is separated from most of the uses that would be mutually beneficial, including housing and businesses that would help to meet the needs of visitors and employees.

The need to avoid this kind of project and replace it with good mixed-use development as envisioned by Gruen and many others is very great.